At the blast of your nostrils the waters
piled up, the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the
sea ...
You blew with your wind, the sea cov-
ered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty
waters." (Exodus 15:1-11)

The obvious attribution of storm, wind and flood to Yahweh above seems very reminiscent of Canaanite Baal. The following verses make the sky god aspect of Yahweh even clearer, by glorifying lightning over the trees and thunder over the water with his voice:

"The voice of Yahweh is over the
waters;
the God of glory thunders,
Yahweh, over mighty waters.
The voice of Yahweh breaks the
cedars;
Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
The voice of Yahweh flashes forth
flames of fire.
The voice of Yahweh shakes the wil-
derness;
The voice of Yahweh causes the oaks
to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!' "
(Psalm 29:1-9)

How did early Israelite religion come to incorporate so much of the above Canaanite polytheist imagery? This question only arises because our preconception is of a monotheist Israelite religion, with no space to accommodate Canaanite deities. This preconception is not always borne out by the textual evidence of the Bible. For example, let us look at the following commandment to Moses:

"I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." (Exodus 20:2-5)

Read carefully, the above does not actually say that no other gods besides Yahweh exist. Rather, it says that the Israelites must worship Yahweh alone, and not give any mind to other gods. Whether or not they exist is a different matter, and not dealt with here. This is not strict monotheism as modern Jews, Christians or Muslims think of it. It is more akin to henotheism, the belief that although many gods may exist, only one is to be worshipped. Henotheism seems like a strange concept in the Biblical context, but again that is only because of our preconception that the Bible is purely monotheist. In more explicitly polytheist contexts, it is commonplace; for example, although Hinduism has a pantheon of many gods and goddesses, individual worshippers often worship only one of them in practice (for example, Shaivites focus on Shiva, Vaishnavites on Vishnu, etc). A very interesting Biblical verse, given below, smacks of henotheism:

From a historical point of view, the assertion that the Israelite religion was originally monotheist is quite difficult to maintain. The Bible itself tells us that Abraham and his sons, the founding ancestors of the Israelites, lived in a Canaanite, polytheist environment.

"When Elyon apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; Yahweh's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share." (Deuteronomy 32:8-9)

Elyon above is usually just translated as "God", and assumed to refer to the same monotheist deity as Yahweh. However, we have seen that Abraham seems to have worshipped the Canaanite god El with the name El-Elyon, while Yahweh only appeared much later to Moses. In that case, the above might actually preserve a tradition by which Yahweh and El are two separate deities, and the elder god El is ceding authority over the Israelites to the newcomer Yahweh. Again, this possibility fits perfectly with henotheism, but not with monotheism.

From a historical point of view, the assertion that the Israelite religion was originally monotheist is quite difficult to maintain. The Bible itself tells us that Abraham and his sons, the founding ancestors of the Israelites, lived in a Canaanite, polytheist environment. But we have only the Biblical tradition that Abraham was an immigrant from Babylonia, to distinguish him from his Canaanite neighbours. The archaeological impossibility of ever verifying the immigration, or even existence, of a single individual into Canaan thousands of years ago means that we will never be able to verify this critical Biblical claim.

On the other hand, we can see from traces of El and Baal in the Bible that the early Israelites who lived in Canaan actually worshipped something similar to Canaanite gods: so how do we know that the first Israelites were not originally Canaanites? If Abraham really came from Ur why would he and his tribe speak Hebrew, a dialect of the Canaanite language? Why would his tribe name themselves "Isra-El" after a Canaanite deity?

To historians it seems much more likely that Abraham himself was Canaanite, and that the accounts of him migrating from Ur are fictional. From the perspective of modern historians, this is a much easier claim to make, as one does not have to prove that Abraham's family migrated from Ur. The Babylonian origin of Abraham probably served a dual purpose; firstly, it associated him with the ancient Babylonian civilization, which was older and more renowned than that the politically insignificant province of Canaan.

Secondly, asserting Abraham's non-Canaanite origins enabled later monotheist Biblical writers to claim that he was not a polytheist Canaanite. This is where modern historians part company with the Biblical account.